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SUBJECT: Decision on Putin documentary raises censorship concerns

¶1. Summary. The decision by Latvian National Television (LTV) to cancel the planned December 1 broadcast of a documentary "Putin's System," which is critical of the Russian President, has produced significant drama and raised questions of censorship. LTV first claimed that the broadcast was cancelled due to technical problems. Unofficial sources immediately reported that the cancellation had been demanded by the Head of the National Radio and TV Council (NRTC) Abrams Kleckins and the Latvian MFA under pressure from the Russian Embassy to Latvia. Speculation about possible censorship at LTV and Russia's role was fueled by contradicting statements by LTV management a few days later claiming that the documentary was actually cancelled because of concern about the political reaction. Kleckins denies that he had asked to cancel the documentary and announced that he will not respond to the calls of the liberal media, media experts and a few members the NRTC to step down. Head of LTV Janis Holsteins announced that he takes responsibility and submitted a resignation on December 5. End summary

¶2. A broadcast of the documentary "Putin's System" was scheduled on National Television channel LTV 7 on December 1, a day before the parliamentary elections in Russia. According to unnamed press sources, the Russian Embassy to Riga asked NRTC chair Abrams Kleckins to cancel the broadcast. It was also reported, again based on unnamed sources, that the Latvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Prime Minister's Office were involved in cancellation of the broadcast on behalf of the Russian Embassy in Riga.

¶3. The Latvian Foreign Affairs Ministry denied that they had placed any pressure on LTV. Foreign Minister Maris Riekstins stated that "if the broadcast was cancelled for other than technical reasons, it was a totally wrong decision. Press freedom is one of the cornerstones of democracy." However, in a December 5 TV show, MFA state secretary Penke admitted that he received a call from the Russian Ambassador and was asked to comment on the content of the documentary and why it was being shown. Since the Latvian MFA did not have any information on the program, they called LTV to learn more. Penke said he exerted no pressure on LTV. The Russian Embassy to Riga denied that they had been involved in the matter at all.

¶4. Head of NRTC Abrams Kleckins admitted that he called LTV to "talk about the documentary," but denied that he exerted any pressure on LTV. Nevertheless, he voiced his personal stance "I was kind of relieved when I learned that broadcast is cancelled since it would have been an unfriendly gesture towards Russia and would have a negative impact on our relations, in particular on the exchange of the Border Treaty ratification instruments." According to Kleckins, "it was good that the documentary was not aired a day before the elections in Russia since it would have been brainwashing [of Russian electorate in Latvia]." Liberal media and a number of experts and politicians have criticized Kleckins' statements and called for his resignation. However, Kleckins said he does not see any grounds for stepping down.

¶5. LTV head Janis Holsteins announced his resignation on December 5. Holsteins made the move ahead of a scheduled meeting with MPs from a nationalist political party who sought explanations about why the documentary was cancelled. Holsteins pointed out that he takes full responsibility for what happened; adding that he did not foresee the ensuing uproar.

¶6. President Zatlers commented on the issue by stating that the Constitution forbids censorship and that he will always protect the freedom of speech. Zatlers sent a letter to Kleckins seeking his explanations on the cancellation.

¶7. The French documentary by directors Jean Michel Carre and Jill Emery goes into the controversies surrounding the rise of Putin from KGB officer to President. Over the past several months the film has been shown in a number of countries. The documentary was rescheduled and broadcast on LTV on December 4.

¶8. Comment. As previously reported, allegations about possible political censorship in LTV appear regularly. As noted by political expert Peteris Vinkelis the strong response to such attempts show that there is democracy and the freedom of speech in Latvia after all. In that regard, the public discussion of censorship that ensued from this episode is positive. But the episode also demonstrates the difficulties inherent in the Latvia-Russia relationship. Even if the MFA did nothing more than ask about the film in response to questions from the Russian Embassy, it is very easy to see in the Latvian context how that would be viewed as political instructions to pull it.

Bailey